DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 469 485 HE 035 310

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TITLE	A Report on the National Survey of Student Engagement. Research Brief.
INSTITUTION	Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, Frankfort.
PUB DATE	2001-12-00
NOTE	7p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.cpe.state.ky.us/facts/researchbriefs%5Cnsse_txt.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Students; Extracurricular Activities; *Higher Education; *Learning Strategies; National Surveys; *State Universities; Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS	*Kentucky

ABSTRACT

Kentucky's 8 public universities participated in the 2001 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as part of a consortium organized by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. The NSSE measures student activities that studies have shown to be critically important to student learning and development. Nationally, more than 105,000 students at 470 four-year institutions participated in the NSSE over the last 2 years. In Kentucky, in 2001, 1,900 first-year and senior students completed a mail-in survey or participated through the Internet. Results from the 2001 NSSE are encouraging. Overall, students at Kentucky's public universities engage in a wide range of effective learning strategies and report satisfying relationships with faculty and fellow students. Kentucky institutions outperform their peers on many of the NSSE's national benchmarks. Significant number of Kentucky students vote, volunteer, and work to promote the welfare of their communities. The Kentucky consortium's participation in NSSE also suggests areas for future improvement. Institutions will have to use their resources creatively to make their campuses more supportive, to address students' needs inside and outside the classroom, while increasing enrollment levels. Campuses should work to maintain high levels of academic challenge and encourage students to take their academic commitments more seriously. (SLD)

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A Report on the National Survey of Student Engagement

December 2001

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A Report on the National Survey of Student Engagement

Introduction

Kentucky's eight public universities participated in the 2001 National Survey of Student Engagement as part of a consortium organized by the council. NSSE, a national survey administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning, examines the extent to which colleges use their resources to promote effective teaching and learning. It measures those student activities – such as time spent preparing for class and frequency of contact between faculty and students outside of class - which studies have shown to be critically important to student learning and development. NSSE challenges college rating systems that focus largely on institutional resources and public reputation. Nationally, over 105,000 students at 470 four-year institutions participated in the survey over the last two years. In 2001, 1,900 first-year and senior students at Kentucky's public postsecondary institutions completed a mail-in survey or participated via the Internet.

The council will use NSSE's five benchmarks of student engagement (identified below) to gauge undergraduate student experience, an indicator under question four of the Key Indicators of Progress toward Postsecondary Reform, "Are we preparing Kentuckians for life and work?" As reform efforts continue, we expect an increasing proportion of undergraduate students to report their college experience includes effective teaching and learning practices.

Results from individual NSSE questions selected by council staff will be used to measure undergraduate civic engagement, also an indicator under question four. Tracking how likely undergraduates are to participate in behaviors like voting and volunteering will help the council assess the contributions public universities and their students make to their communities and the commonwealth.

NSSE's Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

Responses to 41 questions from the NSSE survey – "The College Student Report" -- are assigned to five clusters of similar activities to make up NSSE's national benchmarks of effective educational practice. The benchmarks are created on a 100-point scale. Separate scores, weighted to ensure they are representative of an institution's student population, are reported for first-year and senior students. The benchmarks are:

- Level of academic challenge,
- Active and collaborative learning,
- Student interactions with faculty members,
- Enriching educational experiences,
- Supportive campus environment.

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For each of the benchmarks, NSSE provides institutions with actual and predicted scores (see attachment 1 for institution-specific scores for the Kentucky consortium). The predicted scores are based on student demographics, admissions selectivity, enrollment, and a variety of other factors and allow institutions to compare their performance with the performance of similar institutions. Institutions whose actual score is higher than their predicted score in a given benchmark category outperform their peers in that area.

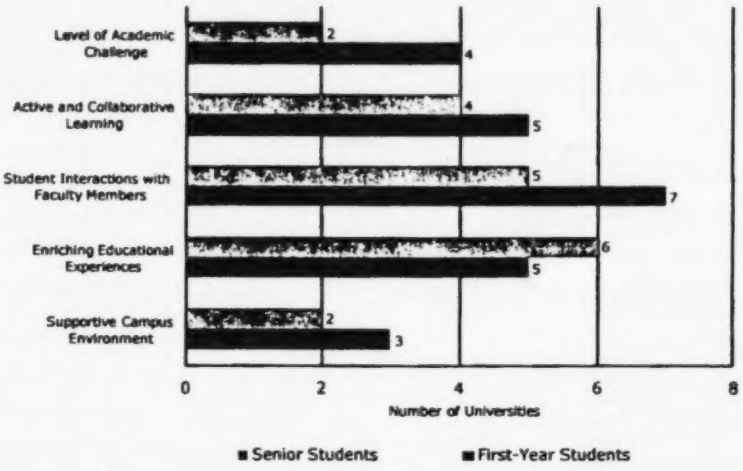
NSSE benchmark scores are designed to facilitate comparison among similar institutions across the United States. NSSE recommends caution when comparing different types of institutions within a state.

Undergraduate Student Experience

Each of Kentucky's public universities scored higher than predicted in several benchmark categories. Members of the Kentucky consortium performed particularly well in the "student interactions with faculty members" and "enriching educational experiences" benchmarks.

Among the indicators included in the calculation of the student interactions with faculty benchmark are frequency with which students report having discussions with faculty members outside of class and work with faculty on projects unrelated to coursework. Seven Kentucky institutions performed above their predicted levels for this benchmark with first-year students; five institutions outperformed their peers with senior students.

Number of Universities Scoring Above Predicted
By NSSE Benchmarks



Students' reported rates of participation in internships, foreign language study and use of technology to complete assignments are among the survey items used to calculate the enriching educational experiences score. Responses from first-year students at five of Kentucky's public universities exceeded their predicted levels. Six universities performed above predicted levels for senior students.

Kentucky's public universities showed less strength in "supportive campus environment" and "level of academic challenge." Only three institutions outperformed their peers in providing a supportive environment for first-year students; two institutions performed above the expected level for senior students. Students at these institutions were more likely to report that the campus environment helped them thrive academically and socially. First-year students at only four institutions and seniors at two institutions reported high levels of academic challenge. Survey items measuring the extent to which courses emphasize the ability to apply theories to practical problems as well as the number of books and papers assigned are among those included in this benchmark.

Civic Engagement

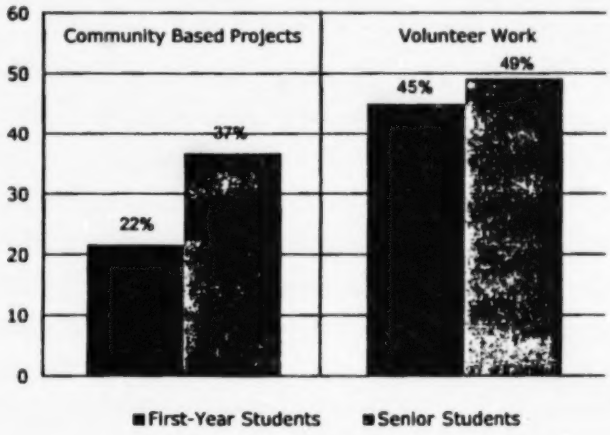
Council staff and institutional representatives selected four items from the NSSE survey to measure undergraduate students' civic engagement:

- Participation in a community-based project as part of a regular course.
- Hours per week spent doing volunteer work.
- Voting in local, state, or national elections.
- Contributing to the welfare of the community.

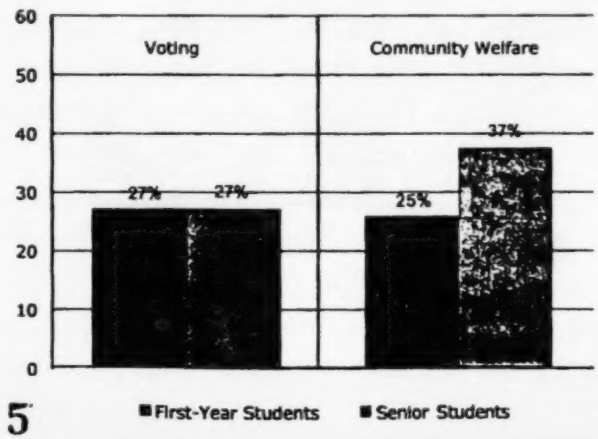
Statewide, 22 percent of first year students and 37 percent of seniors reported participating in a community-based project as part of a regular course [see attachment 2 for results by institution]. Undergraduates reported higher rates of participation in general volunteer work: 45 percent of first-year students and 49 percent of seniors indicated they spent some time each week volunteering for an educational, charitable or religious cause.

NSSE participants were asked how their experience in college contributed to their personal development in a number of areas, including voting and contributing to the welfare of their community. These survey

Percentage of Students Volunteering



Percentage of Students Who Reported College Contributed Significantly to Development



questions are not intended to measure behavior – how many students actually vote, for instance – but how college has shaped their attitudes toward certain behaviors. Approximately 27 percent of both first-year and senior students in the Kentucky consortium reported that their experience had contributed "very much" or "quite a bit" to their ideas about voting. One quarter of first-year students and 37 percent of senior students reported their university experience had made a significant contribution toward their developing attitudes about community welfare.

Additional Findings

In addition to providing institutions with individual profiles, NSSE issues an annual report identifying key findings. Many of the encouraging findings profiled in the 2001 report are mirrored at the state level in Kentucky:

- 90 percent of students nationally and 93 percent in the Kentucky consortium report working with other students on projects at least "occasionally."
- 72 percent of seniors nationally and 73 percent at Kentucky's public universities participated in internships or co-ops.
- Almost half of all students nationwide and more than three-fourths of all students in the Kentucky consortium report having serious conversations with students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

A more discouraging finding is the significant gap identified by the survey between the amount of time students spend on educational activities and the recommended level of effort. Nationally, "students spend only about half as much time preparing for class as their teachers recommend is necessary" [NSSE *Viewpoint*, 3]. Asked how much time they spend per week preparing for class, students' median response nationally was between 11 and 15 hours. Students at Kentucky's public universities reported spending even less time – between 6 and 10 hours – preparing for class.

Conclusion

Results from the Kentucky consortium's participation in the 2001 NSSE are encouraging. Overall, students at Kentucky's public universities engage in a wide range of effective learning strategies and report satisfying relationships with faculty and fellow students. Kentucky institutions outperform their peers on many of NSSE's national benchmarks. Significant numbers of Kentucky students vote, volunteer, and work to promote the welfare of their communities.

The Kentucky consortium's participation in NSSE suggests areas for future improvement as well. Institutions will have to use their resources creatively to make their campuses more supportive -- to address students' needs inside and outside the classroom -- while increasing enrollment levels. At the same time, campuses should work to maintain high levels of academic challenge and encourage students to take their academic commitments more seriously.

Results from the 2001 NSSE are baseline data. The council will continue to measure improvements in undergraduate student experience and civic engagement as the process of postsecondary reform continues. The Kentucky Consortium will participate in NSSE again in 2003.

Prepared by Christina E. Whitfield

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